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DISCUSSION AID ON ABUSE
OF THE ELDERLY

BY

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DISCUSSION AID

ISSUE

The Development of Protective Measures Against Crime and Abuse of the Elderly

GOAL

- a) To devise, improve and/or extend measures to protect aged persons against
 - i) abuse of relatives or persons in community settings;
 - ii) assault and other criminal acts.

FACTORS

A. Relating to abuse of elderly persons

1. The Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (C.U.V.S. 1982) has found that elderly persons (65 and older) who live in private households are much less likely to be the victims of sexual assault, assault, robbery, theft of personal property, break and entry or other household crimes than are those who are 64 years of age or younger.
2. The assault rate for elderly people in the seven urban centres studied (Greater Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax/Dartmouth and St. John's) was 8 per 1,000 population 65 and older as compared to 58 per 1,000 population for those who were 64 or younger. Elderly males were three times as likely as elderly females to be victims of assault. Younger males (64 and younger) were twice as likely to be assaulted as younger females.
3. Overall, victims were assaulted by strangers in 66% of the incidents captured by the survey; by acquaintances in 29% of the assault incidents; and by relatives (spouses, ex-spouses or other relatives) in 6%. For elderly victims, the proportion of assaults committed by strangers increased to 74%. Incidents involving acquaintances and relatives account for the remainder, but are too few to allocate separately from sample findings.

In summary, the survey shows that only about 2 of every 1,000 persons in the elderly population surveyed had been victims of any assault/abuse by a non-stranger over the study period (1981). For younger people the rate was approximately 20 incidents per 1,000 population. It is important to recognize, however, that telephone survey techniques may not capture abuse of elderly very effectively because those most dependent and vulnerable to abuse may be least able to divulge their circumstances to interviewers, and because those who live in institutional environments are not included in the sample.

B. Relating to Fear of Crime

1. Elderly people are much more likely than others to say they feel unsafe walking alone in their own neighbourhood at night. Combining the results from the seven cities studies, twice as many elderly residents (30%) felt "very unsafe" after dark as younger residents (15%). At the other extreme, only 19% of those 65 and older felt "very safe" walking alone at night, whereas 33% of the younger population felt "very safe".
2. Overall, the proportion of the population aged 16-64 who stated they felt "very unsafe" after dark varied considerably from one city to another. Nevertheless, the percentage of elderly stating they felt very unsafe was roughly double in each case. In other words, whatever proportion of non-elderly residents feel very unsafe after dark, roughly twice that percentage of elderly residents express similar strong fears.
3. The more serious crimes were, the more likely all victims were to feel that emotional or psychological counselling should be available for "their" type of crime. Thus 86% of the sexual assault victims agreed that counselling should be available, as did 56% of robbery victims, 45% of assault victims, 32% of break and entry victims and 13% of the victims of the least serious crime studied, vandalism. Perhaps surprisingly, elderly victims were no more likely to support the need for counselling services for victims than were their younger counterparts.
4. Participation in the Operation Identification crime prevention programs was weakly related to reduction in fear of walking alone at night, but this relationship was not uniform in each of the cities studied.

POSSIBLE ACTION AREAS

From the Victimization Survey data it seems clear that abuse or assault of elderly citizens by spouses or relatives is rare, at least among those who are living in private residences and are capable of responding to telephone interview questions. One is therefore lead to the conclusion that little specialized action for the provision of victim services seems warranted with regard to this population. However, the fear experienced by elderly people, and their physical and/or economic vulnerability underscore the need to sensitize those who deal with the victims of crime to the special needs of elderly victims. Indeed crime prevention designed for elderly people and with the active participation of elderly people can do much not only to reduce crimes against them but also to reduce their fear and vulnerability. Unfortunately, the data from the C.U.V.S. cannot address the situations of seriously infirm residents of private homes, or of elderly people who live in commercial or institutional settings.